

## 2.6 Knights During Feudal Times

**armor** a covering, usually made of metal or leather, worn to protect the body during fighting.

Knights were the mounted soldiers of the medieval world. In general, knights had to have some wealth, as a full suit of armor and a horse cost a small fortune. Knights were usually vassals of more powerful lords.

**Becoming a Knight** The path to becoming a knight involved many years of training. A boy started as a page, or servant. At the age of seven, he left home and went to live at the castle of a lord, who was often a relative. Nearly all wealthy lords had several pages living in their castle. A page learned how to ride a horse and received religious instruction from the local priest or friar.

Before a joust or tournament, knights received gifts, or tokens of support, from the ladies of the manor.

During this first stage of training, pages spent much of their time with the ladies of the castle. They were expected to help the ladies in every way possible. The ladies taught pages how to sing, dance, compose music, and play the harp. These skills were valued in knights.

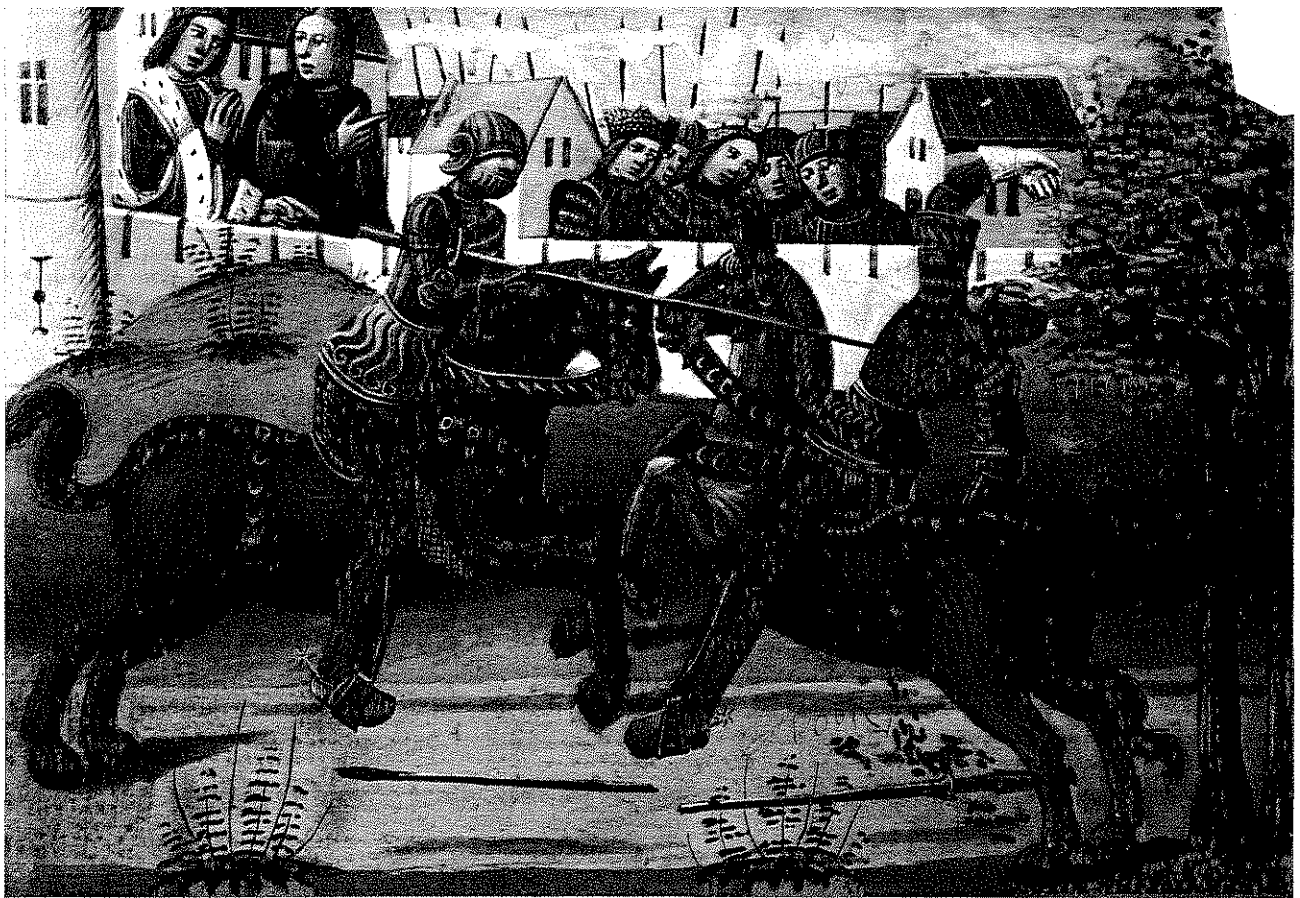
After about seven years as a page, a young boy became a squire. During this part of his training, he spent most of his time with the

knight who was his lord. He polished the knight's armor, sword, shield, and lance. He helped care for his horse. He even waited on him at mealtime, carrying water for hand washing, carving meat, and filling his cup when it was empty.

Most importantly, squires trained to become warriors. They learned how to fight with a sword and a lance, a kind of spear that measured up to 15 feet long. They also learned how to use a battle-ax and a mace (a club with a heavy metal head). They practiced by fighting in make-believe battles. But squires also went into real battles. A squire was expected to help dress his lord in armor, follow him into battle, and look after him if he was wounded.

In his early 20s, if he was deserving, a squire became a knight. Becoming a knight could be a complex religious event. A squire often spent the night before his knighting in prayer. The next morning, he bathed and put on a white tunic, or long shirt, to show his purity. During the ceremony, he knelt before his lord and said his vows. The lord drew his sword, touched the knight-to-be lightly on each shoulder with





the flat side of the blade, and knighted him. Sometimes, if a squire did particularly well in battle, he was knighted on the spot.

**The Responsibilities and Daily Life of Knights** Being a knight was more than a profession. It was a way of life. Knights lived by a strong code of behavior called **chivalry**. (*Chivalry* comes from the French word *cheval*, meaning “horse.”) Knights were expected to be loyal to their church and their lord, to be just and fair, and to protect the helpless. They performed acts of gallantry, or respect paid to women. From these acts, we get the modern idea of chivalry as traditional forms of courtesy and kindness toward women.

Jousts and tournaments were a major part of a knight’s life. In a joust, two armed knights on horseback galloped at each other with their lances held straight out. The idea was to unseat the opponent from his horse. Jousts could be done as a sport, for exercise, or as a serious battle. A tournament involved a team of knights in one-on-one battle.

Knights fought wearing heavy suits of armor. In the 11th century, armor was made of metal rings linked together. By the 14th century, plate armor was more common and offered better protection.

The institution of knighthood lasted until about the 17th century, when warfare changed with the growing use of gunpowder and cannons. Knights, who fought one-to-one on horseback, were no longer effective.

Next let’s turn to daily life for the vast majority of the medieval population: the peasants.

Knights in a joust tried to knock each other off their horses.

**chivalry** the medieval knight’s code of ideal behavior, including bravery, loyalty, and respect for women

## 22.9 The Code of Bushido and Samurai Values

The samurai code developed over several centuries. By the 17th century, it took final form in Bushido, "The Way of the Warrior."

The code of Bushido governed a samurai's life. It called on samurai to be honest, fair, and fearless in the face of death. Samurai were

expected to value loyalty and personal honor even more than their lives.

### Loyalty and Personal Honor

A samurai's supreme duty was to be so loyal to his lord that he would gladly die for him. If his lord was murdered, a samurai might avenge his death. A samurai poem says,

*Though a time come  
when mountains crack  
and seas go dry,  
never to my lord  
will I be found double-hearted!*

Samurai were also expected to guard their personal honor. The least insult on the street could lead to a duel. One samurai, for example, accidentally knocked his umbrella against another samurai's umbrella. This quickly turned into a quarrel and then a sword fight, resulting in the first samurai's death.

**Ritual Suicide** The price for failing to live up to the code of Bushido was *seppuku*, or ritual suicide. There were many reasons for seppuku, including preserving personal honor and avoiding capture in battle. Samurai might also perform seppuku to atone for a crime, a shameful deed, or an insult to a person of higher rank. Some samurai killed themselves when their lord died, as a form of protest against a wrong or an injustice, or to shame their lord into behaving better. Finally, a samurai might be ordered to perform seppuku as punishment for a crime.

Seppuku became an elaborate ceremony. Guests were invited. The samurai prepared by taking a bath, unbinding his long hair, and putting on the white clothes used for dressing a corpse. He was served his favorite foods. When he finished eating, a sword was placed on the tray. He took the sword and plunged it into and across his stomach, trying to make a complete circle. A swordsman standing behind him quickly cut off his head to end his agony.

Samurai were fair, honest, and loyal to their lords above all else. They would fight deadly duels to avenge an insult or their lord's death.



Minamoto Yoritomo, Japan's first shogun, liked to release wild cranes on the beach near his castle.

## 22.2 The Rise of the Samurai

The military government established by Minamoto Yoritomo was led by a **shogun**, or commander-in-chief. Although emperors continued to rule in name, the real power shifted to the shoguns.

**Samurai Under the Shoguns** Yoritomo and his successors rewarded warriors, or samurai, with appointments to office and grants of land. In return, the samurai pledged to serve and protect the shogun.

The rise of the samurai brought a new emphasis on military values in Japanese culture. All samurai trained in the arts of war, especially archery. During this period, women as well as men could be samurai. Girls and boys alike were trained to harden their feelings and to use weapons. One samurai wrote,

*Of what use is it to allow the mind to concentrate on the moon and flowers, compose poems, and learn how to play musical instruments?... Members of my household, including women, must learn to ride wild horses, and shoot powerful bows and arrows.*

**Shifting Loyalties** By the 14th century, Japan's warrior society resembled the lord-vassal system of medieval Europe. The shogun now ruled with the help of warrior-lords called **daimyos**. In turn, the daimyos were supported by large numbers of samurai. The daimyos expected to be rewarded for their obedience and loyalty with land, money, or administrative office. The samurai expected the same from the daimyos they served.

Over time, the position of the shogun weakened as daimyos became increasingly powerful. Daimyos began treating their lands like independent kingdoms. Samurai now allied themselves with their daimyo lords.

In the late 15th century, Japan fell into chaos. Daimyos warred with one another for land and power. Samurai fought fierce battles on behalf of their lords.

After a century of bloody warfare, a series of skilled generals defeated their rival daimyos and reestablished a strong military government. In 1603, the last of these leaders, Tokugawa Ieyasu, became shogun. Ieyasu established a new capital in Edo (present-day Tokyo).

For the next 250 years, Japan was at peace. Samurai served under shoguns and administered the government. It was during this time that the samurai ideal came to full flower. Let's look now at what the samurai way of life was like.



**shogun** the head of the military government of Japan in the era of the samurai

**daimyo** a local lord in Japan in the era of the samurai

## 22.3 The Samurai's Armor and Weapons

A samurai was, first and foremost, a warrior. Let's look at what a samurai wore in battle and the weapons he used.

**Armor** A samurai went into battle dressed in heavy armor. Under the armor he wore a colorful robe called a *kimono* and baggy trousers. Shinguards made of leather or cloth protected his legs.

Samurai armor was unique. It was made of rows of small metal plates coated with lacquer and laced together with colorful silk cords. This type of armor was strong, yet flexible enough for the samurai to move freely.

Boxlike panels of armor covered the samurai's chest and back. Metal sleeves covered his arms. Broad shoulder guards and panels that hung over his hips provided additional protection. Some samurai wore thigh guards as well.

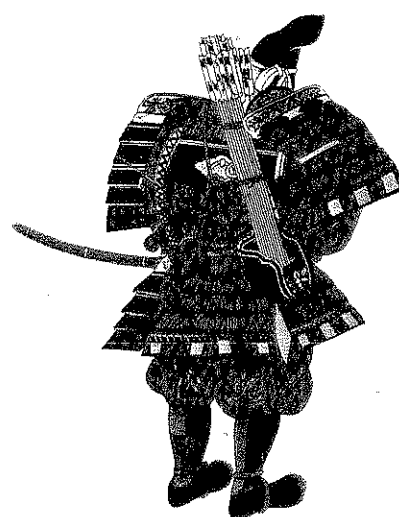
After dressing in his body armor, the samurai put on a ferocious-looking iron mask that was meant to frighten his opponents as well as protect his face. Last came his helmet. Before putting on the helmet, he burned incense in it. That way, his head would smell sweet if it were cut off in battle.

**Weapons** Samurai fought with bows and arrows, spears, and swords. A samurai's wooden bow could be up to eight feet long. Such long bows took great strength to use. In battle, sharpshooters on horseback rode toward each other, pulling arrows from the quivers on their backs and firing them at the enemy.

In hand-to-hand combat, some foot soldiers used spears to knock riders off their horses and to kill an enemy on foot with a powerful thrust.

The samurai's most prized weapon, however, was his sword. Japanese sword makers were excellent craftsmen, and samurai swords were the finest in the world. They were flexible enough not to break, but hard enough to be razor sharp. Samurai carried two types of swords. To fight, they used a long sword with a curved blade. A shorter sword was used for cutting off heads.

Wearing a sword was the privilege and right of the samurai. Swords were passed down through generations of warrior families and given as prizes to loyal warriors. Even after peace was established in the 17th century, samurai proudly wore their swords as a sign of their rank.



Samurai wore elaborate suits of armor with many layers. The layers allowed the samurai to be protected while moving freely.

This series of drawings shows a samurai putting on a suit of armor.

